

TITLE: Myths and Truths of Training

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~~Confidential~~*Educational experiences***Myths and Truths
Of Training**

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My time in training . . . Setting aside experiences before the Agency, it started with occasional lecturing at the Office of Training and Education (OTE) and the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), mostly on economic development and South Vietnam. Then a tour as the faculty economist at the National War College, with related work in the economics department of the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. Four years, on and off, of back and forth to teach at West Point. More OTE lecturing. Seven months in OTE as a course director. A year in FSI's Senior Seminar, in which, though a student, I helped with various course designs. A little over two years as OTE's Deputy Director for Curriculum.

Having had more than the average amount of exposure to training in my 28 years with the Agency, I feel free to put down a word or two on the principal fictions and non-fictions that surround it, especially in our culture. But I hasten to note that I make no claim to being a professional trainer. Rather, I can relate to trainers as a baseball commentator relates to players: I recognize a good stance and swing, but I make no claim that I can hit the ball.

Some Myths

The most remarkable thing about training myths is their resistance to contravening fact. They are a bit like the concept of the miasma in premodern medicine. Even if they have little or no explanatory power, people will die to defend them.

Myth 1: *Training can cure almost all organizational problems.*

Who would say such a thing? Just about anyone who has ever conducted a study on what is wrong

with our components, facilities, people, or product. Inevitably, studies by the Inspector General or the Product Evaluation Staff contain at least some reference to training, primarily because most people do not understand what can and cannot be taught. And because training is an easy answer in a nation that expects a lot from formal education. As one veteran OTE trainer puts it:

Training becomes a solution when taking on the hard issues is too difficult. For example, send supervisors to management training when the real problem is the lack of a clearly articulated system for management of people and programs. Or, if we train managers on alcoholism, we will fix the problem when, in fact, the problem is good management (know your people).

But there is a second, and substantial, reason why we look to training to do so much: people neither understand how resistant entrenched behavior is to change nor how adults absorb new information. Specialists on adult education recognize, for example, that most of what a worker needs to know about his or her job is learned at the worksite, not in the classroom. The layman has an entirely different outlook on this issue. He looks back on years of formal education before he took a job, and he is not about to view those years as wasted.

But there are key times when the adult needs to take on new blocks of information, and these are periods in which the putative student is receptive to information and the development of skills. Even then, however, the going can be rough. There probably is no area in which training is more difficult than in the teaching of management skills. A new manager presumably would be eager to

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acquire skills and avoid pitfalls. The fact is that most new managers have accumulated strong opinions on what was wrong with the managers for whom they worked. Consequently, they are prepared to manage with a "style" that is reactive to their past rather than constructive toward their current environment and the future.

As a result of this complex of interacting factors, the trainers often have to begin with the formidable task of clearing away some of the clutter from the minds of new managers. It is such a consistent pattern that trainers have labeled this the "unfreezing" stage of training. Although it is particularly characteristic of managerial training, it is certainly not unique to this discipline. It parallels the same problems that sports professionals have in training the neophyte who has learned a set of skills "on his own." The pro first has to help the student "unlearn" bad habits. Managers who try through their best feedback methods to improve the performance of subordinates and are consistently unsuccessful will also recognize this phenomenon.

I am not saying that training cannot have a substantial positive impact on people or organizations. We just need to understand that training is most effective with adults when they want it and then learn what is most appropriate to their needs.

OTE's experience with management training over the past few years provides a classic example. When I was a course director in the Intelligence Training Division in 1986, the OTE Management School was undergoing some serious problems of adaptation. It was clear to OTE's director that, with some exceptions, the students were not enthusiastic about the courses being offered. After some soul-searching, OTE decided to stop teaching most management courses until it could do a zero-based assessment of the real needs of Agency managers.

This process produced course designs that were submitted to the Agency's Training Steering Group (the Associate Deputy Directors and a representative of the DCI area) and, in two instances, approved as mandatory for Agency managers. The Management Training Division of OTE

has since gone through repeated re-evaluations of the core courses, now contained in one course, "Managing and Leading in CIA," to assure that the students' needs are met. This course has been supplemented with "Managers in Residence" (people on rotation from their organization) and "Managers in the Classroom" (on loan for a particular course running) to assure the job-relevance of the training material. In April 1990, OTE management trainers again refocused their efforts by reaching agreement with the Directorate of Intelligence to conduct the "modern" equivalent of the earlier-required two mandatory courses plus "Supervision of Analysis" and "Counseling Skills for Managers," supplemented by its "Multicultural Management."

Myth 2: Any intelligent person can train others, if he or she understands the relevant substantive issues or skills.

This is first cousin to that old saw, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." The underlying concept is that a good education and the accumulation of knowledge are necessary and sufficient conditions to produce a competent trainer. Necessary, yes. Sufficient, no. But we are led to believe this by the fact that our universities hire people with PhDs to teach who have never been trained to train, and they do just fine. Or do they? Who has never had a teacher who made an hour seem like an eternity, without adding anything to what was contained in the textbook?

We forget that higher education in most of America is based on the concept that the students are children. And once the child-student is liberated from the high school or university, he or she is not about to go back to being treated as a captive. At this stage, you have to be able to show students that their efforts in the classroom will enhance their lives.

People who teach adults regularly have to be trained how to do it. In serious recognition of this, OTE conducts "Train the Trainers" courses. Some parts of the Agency that have long presented lectures and workshops on component-specific issues have discovered that they can benefit from

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OTE training in this area, and it has become a growth industry. In my recollection, the highest-ranked student we ever had in this course was an office director bound for a rotational assignment outside the Agency. To his everlasting credit, he had the good sense to come to OTE to find out how he could do his best in the classroom. He was the star pupil of his particular running of "Train the Trainers."

Effective trainers in the private sector learn about their audiences before they settle on how they are going to present their material, even if they have already run a course many times. They tailor what they say to the audience's goals and interests. Every word is intended to hold the attention of their audience. They emphasize a limited number of key points because they understand that you can only communicate about three substantial issues to an adult in an hour. They pepper their presentations with specifics on how the student will be able to use the material back on the job. And they stick to the day's schedule because they recognize the importance of the audience's time.

I once asked a truly superb commercial trainer why his industry's best trainers did so well. His explanation was simple: "There are a lot of us who want to do this work. You screw up once, they fire you." As Samuel Johnson said, "Nothing so clarifies the mind as the imminent prospect of hanging in the morning."

Myth 3: *The most important part of teaching adults is knowing the key facts they have to learn.*

I cannot recall a supervisor I have ever been fonder of than a former commandant of the National War College. A bomber jockey by training, he was completely out of his element at the college. His great contributions to his staff and faculty were his unswerving support, his humility, and his willingness to stay out of our way so that we could do the job. On the few occasions that he intruded, he would end up saying, "Know your stuff, and that is everything." He was dead wrong. Having command of a set of facts is not the same as being able to convey them—or skills and techniques—to an audience.

More than a few recommendations from senior managers for training are built around the idea that a set of facts has to be passed on to the students. There are many instances in which students need to absorb certain facts, but an audience will tune you out fast if you firehose it with facts. Good students come to the classroom to discuss concepts and to challenge the ideas of others.

One of my most dismal moments in OTE came when I reviewed a videotape that was to be used in training in another part of the Agency. The other component had taken the lead in drafting the script, even though it had no experience in scriptwriting. The initial product was a 10-minute video rich in facts that could charitably be described as a talking Agency regulation. The two representatives from the component, who had a vital interest in its success, fell asleep almost immediately at the first running of the video. Fortunately, they agreed to turn the project over to OTE media folks who knew how to write scripts and make video lively.

Myth 4: *The teacher is the focal point of learning in the classroom.*

This classic misconception can as easily be attributed to some trainers as to students. I have asked trainers many times how their students reacted to a course and been told that it went over like gangbusters. But the student evaluations were the equivalent of burlesque's "Give 'em the hook."

What is happening here? The trainer becomes enamored of his own voice and forgets the students, who conclude that they are not going to be able to intrude on this bout of theatrical narcissism and thus tune out the trainer. They emerge from their comatose state only when it is time to fill out the evaluation.

In fairness, I suspect that this bacterium infects all trainers at one time or another. I remember addressing a class in an overheated room late in a long day. I decided to do the students a favor by speeding up my lecture to get them out early. When I finished, I got two polite questions, both of which were crafted to ensure that my answers

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could only be monosyllabic. The best evaluation I got for that unit read: "Nice suit."

The best trainers understand that a successful course is often one in which the students talk as much or more to the teacher and to each other as the trainer talks to them. This concept is at least as old as Socrates.

Myth 5: The best way to assess a course is to ask your employees about it as soon as they are back on the job.

Trainers in OTE and elsewhere have suffered more needless grief on this avenue of sorrows than any other. I am constantly amazed at what usually discerning managers or colleagues will take as useful input from the recently returned trainee on the value of training. Training has to meet the needs of the employee, and one of the few ways to measure this is to ask the students how a course helped. It is beyond me, however, why supervisors, after telling trainers that they know Charlie or Sue is unreliable, not very bright or skilled, and may not be at the Agency much longer, will not question their negative evaluations. For some critics, "didn't like the course" is a complete answer.

For a variety of reasons, the National Security Agency has to depend on extensive and continuous training over the course of its officers' careers. Unlike in our Agency, NSA trainers have a good deal of power over the students and their managers. Certain courses have to be completed for promotion and advancement. Both the student and his or her manager have to complete evaluations of the course; the manager's is based on whether the student has demonstrated the requisite skills on the job. Until the two forms are submitted, the student cannot be certified to promotion panels as having met the requirements.

In this system, evaluation techniques have to be above reproach. NSA has the largest course evaluation staff in the Intelligence Community. The evaluators agree that time has to pass before the supervisor can evaluate what impact training has had.

Myth 6: A tour in training constitutes a simple flow of service and knowledge from the person on rotation to the training component.

Almost uniformly, people who do tours in training say several things when they are over.

- They understand their own field better than they did before, (Try, as I did, teaching beginning economics to 35- to 45-year-old field grade officers, mostly trained in engineering, and see if you can fake your way around the parts of your own discipline on which you were a bit fuzzy. It does not work.)
- They have a better grasp of where training can and cannot be helpful to their own employees. (Trainers are mostly extroverted or have learned to behave as extroverts. You learn a lot about other trainers' programs when you are among them.)
- They have a better appreciation of the Agency's mission and what other parts of the organization do than they did going in. (No matter what you teach, if it entails contacts with new employees, they are going to force you to learn enough about the Agency to help them understand better. And, as is often the case, classes that mix people from several Agency components provide ample opportunity for lateral transmission of data.)

In recognition of these and other facts, the Federal Bureau of Investigation regards assignment to training as a sign that the employee is a comer. In fact, the Bureau uses training assignments at various career stages as a way to size people up for increased responsibility. (It is no coincidence that James Greenleaf, who was briefly head of the Agency's Office of Public Affairs, passed through CIA from a position as the FBI's director of training to one as the FBI equivalent of our own Deputy Director for Administration.)

I have been equally bemused by what I see as a remarkable lack of understanding Agency-wide about what goes on in training in our organization.

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Most Agency employees know that OTE has a host of courses on a variety of topics. In fact, it conducts about 250 separate courses, many of them multiple times a year. It and the various other Agency components also support a prodigious amount of external training. Most funding of external training now comes from the sponsoring Agency components, while most of the logistics of processing the requests and entering course completion data in the records falls to OTE.

In FY1990 there were some (b)(3)(c) student-instances of external training ranging from one-day workshops to full year academic institutions. This compares with (b)(3)(c) such instances in FY 1985. Full-time academic training is growing rapidly, too. In FY1990 there were roughly (b)(3)(c) people taking such training; there were (b)(3)(c) in FY1985.

A lot of other Agency components also conduct training. Several different parts of the Directorate of Operations (DO), for example, conduct surveillance training. The Office of Communications has its own substantial training program, both internal and external. The Directorate of Science & Technology conducts some directorate-wide training and supports training efforts in its own components and in OTE. The National Photographic Interpretation Center trains its people in a variety of component-specific skills. The Office of Security and the Counterintelligence Center have training components, as does the Office of Information Technology. The Office of Technical Services has a wide range of specialized skills in which it has to instruct its employees. At one time or another, almost all of us have been exposed to presentations by the Office of Medical Services on health issues.

To keep track of this array of programs, the Agency has some (b)(3)(c) training officers dotted among its ranks. Add to this the dozen or so people in OTE who register folks for their internal programs and a plethora of external programs.

Truth 2: OTE spends a lot of time and trouble trying to design courses that are relevant and useful for the Agency population.

"If OTE would only listen to our needs" is one of the oft-heard canards in this area. Having seen this one from the inside, I would be royally upset as a taxpayer if OTE paid more attention to course design and tailoring its product to fit needs than it now does. Unfortunately, most of the Agency does not know the process that OTE goes through in putting new courses together.

Before a new OTE course design leaves the drawing board the first time, it typically has been vetted with those parts of the Agency most likely to be interested in it. Then it has to be defended before the Curriculum Committee, a body made up of all of OTE's division chiefs and chaired by the Deputy Director for Curriculum. If it survives this process reasonably intact, it is presented to the Senior Training Officers, a group made up of single representatives from each directorate and the DCI's Executive Staff. If the program is substantial in scope, it will probably go before the Training Steering Group. Once it clears this hurdle, it can be run in the classroom. Each running of the course includes completion of standardized evaluation sheets, which become the basis of further redesign and retunings.

Truth 3: There are some kinds of training that the Agency does that have no real parallels in other organizations, and this training is admired by other US Government trainers.

When I first joined OTE, I expected that I would learn that the really exotic stuff was what we did in training in tradecraft, science and technology, and advanced analytic methods. Some remarkable things have been produced in these areas, such as advanced tradecraft training for officers going to dangerous areas, work to familiarize our staff with new directions (b)(3)(n) and a (b)(3)(n) course that is highly regarded by other components of the Intelligence Community.

But there are rough analogs for all these things in at least some other organizations. Some of the glitter of uniqueness of the first-rate Career Training Program, for example, was diminished for me when I looked at aspects of the FBI training for Special Agents or visited West Point to see how its staff developed a sense of belonging and mission.

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One type of training that we do particularly well—and extensively—is secretarial training. Other courses that have no clear analogs in the rest of the government are the ones in our “Working with People” program, which focuses on interpersonal skills. Moreover, few if any other US Government agencies would be willing to tackle a training challenge like our “Counterintelligence Awareness Program” that every employee will take.

Truth 4: Since the mid-1980s, OTE has made and continues to make every effort to deliver training in a way that reduces the employee's loss of time on the job in taking it.

To get training to the customer, OTE—among other things—uses: classrooms in both headquarters buildings; the courses presented over Headquarters's television grid; learning centers, including one in (b)(3)(n) a flood of self-study materials; and training teams that go overseas (b)(3)(n)

One of the really touching experiences in my tour as Deputy Director for Curriculum was looking at (b)(3)(n) evaluations from such places as (b)(3)(n) that said that the secretaries who had been trained in the field were delighted that someone in Washington thought enough of them to

recognize they were a part of the Agency team. Some claimed that, from their perspective, this was the first real recognition from Headquarters in what had been long careers with us.

In addition to facilitating access to courses as a way to save the employee's time, OTE has since the mid-1980s worked hard to shorten course designs. In part, the position of Deputy Director for Curriculum became a “supergrade” slot in recognition of the need to put as much muscle as possible behind the review of course designs. The net effect has been to reduce consistently course lengths to less than a week wherever possible. I suspect no single question has passed the lips of the four successive Deputy Directors for Curriculum more often than, “Can't we shorten this?”

Truth 5: Each employee can have an impact on how training is conducted in the Agency.

The network of training officers works up as well as down in seeking ideas for new training. If you believe you have a good idea for useful training, it is a part of their job to help get your message across. Tell them what is on your mind.

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